

# Why political leaders just don't get it.

When mistakes happen and politicians just don't fess up.

TransComm 2012 Conference





# An example of what we see too often

**Sarah Palin, October 21, 2008**

- ◆ We believe that the best of America is in these small towns that we get to visit, and in these wonderful little pockets of what I call the real America, being here with all of you hard-working, very patriotic, very pro-America areas of this great nation."

**Sarah Palin, October 22, 2008**

- ◆ "I don't want that misunderstood," Palin said. "If that's the way it came across, I apologize."

# The need to apologize

- ◆ The central theme of my work is that human beings engage in recurrent patterns of communicative behavior to reduce, redress, or avoid damage to their reputation (or face or image) from perceived wrong-doing.

# Why do we have this need?

- 1 Complaints are routinely leveled at all of us, including politicians, for all sorts of alleged misbehavior.
- 2 Accordingly we repeatedly face situations that impel us to explain or justify our behavior, to offer excuses or apologies for those aspects of behavior that offend or evoke reproach from those around us.
- 3 Our face, image, or reputation is a valuable commodity.

# What do politicians say?

- How many politicians have you seen, once their reputation has been questioned, say absolutely the wrong thing:

- [President Bill Clinton in 1996](#)      [President Bill Clinton 1998](#)

- Former Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott

- Senator John Edwards

- The 2012 presidential candidates—Herman Cain, Rick Perry, Mitt Romney



# Image Restoration Strategies

## 💧 Denial

- 💧 Simple denial—I did not do it.
- 💧 Shifting the blame—I may have done it, but I was entrapped.

## 💧 Evading of responsibility

- 💧 Provocation—Something or someone caused me to act badly.
- 💧 Minimization—it really isn't as bad as others say.
- 💧 Defeasibility—I did not know that what I was doing was wrong.

# Image Restoration Strategies

## 💧 **Evading of responsibility**

- 💧 Bolstering—I may have done wrong, but I have done so many good things in the past.
- 💧 Transcendence—I may have done wrong, but it was for the greater good.

## 💧 **Corrective action**

- 💧 Mend one's ways—I may have done wrong, but I will not do it again.
- 💧 Compensation—I may have done wrong, but I am going back and helping those I have hurt.



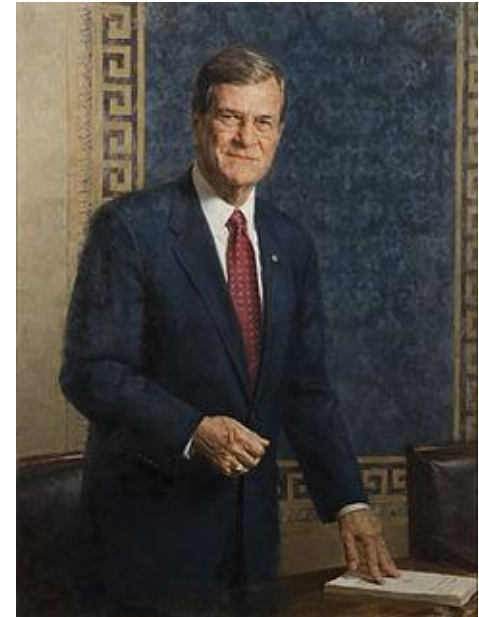
# Image Restoration Strategies

## 💧 **Mortification**

- 💧 Admit responsibility and ask for forgiveness—I did it and I am sorry.
- 💧 Conversion—I have done wrong and have changed.

# Case study #1—Failed apology

- ◆ Former Senator Trent Lott spoke at Senator Strom Thurmond's birthday celebration. He praised Thurman by saying the country would have been better off had Thurmond won the presidency in 1948.
- ◆ Huge response to his statements, claiming Lott was a racist.
- ◆ He resigned as Majority Leader of the Senate on Dec. 2, 2002.



# Case study #1—Failed apology

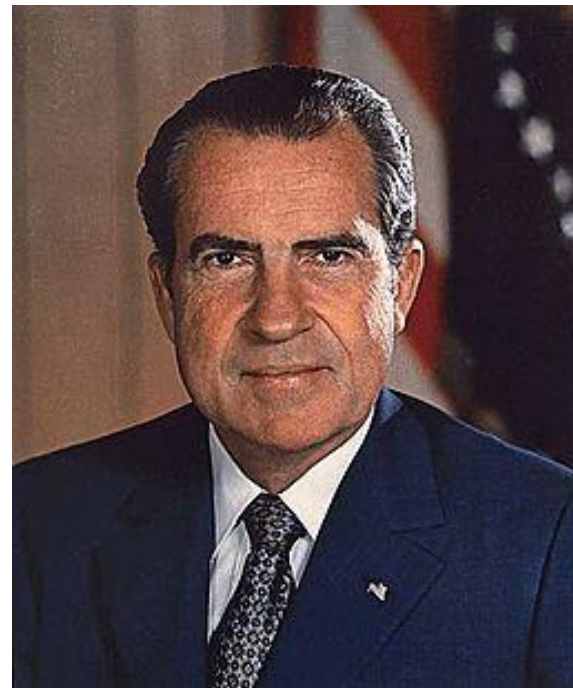
1. Written statement in which he said “my words were poorly chosen and insensitive, and I regret the way they have been interpreted.”
2. Oral comment on Hannity show: “I regret the way it (the statement) has been interpreted.”
3. Comment on Larry King” “That’s the way I have seen Senator Thurmond. He has changed over the years and I think that, you know, he has developed, you know, a progressive record in many ways. So, that’s what I was thinking about.”

# Case study #1—Failed apology

4. Statement at press conference in MS, claiming he was son of sharecropper and a product of a segregationist time, in “an environment that condoned policies that we now know were wrong and immoral, and I repudiate them.”
5. Comments on Black Entertainment Television in which he took responsibility for his comments about Thurmond as “repugnant” and stating “I am looking forward for this to not only be an opportunity for redemption, but to do something about it.”

# Case #2—Successful Apology

- ◆ Then Senator Richard Nixon was chosen as General Dwight D. Eisenhower's VP running mate in 1952. A *New York Times* accused Nixon of using approximately \$36,000 in campaign funds for his own personal use.
- ◆ The Eisenhower campaign was considering dropping Nixon from the ticket.



# Case #2—Successful Apology

- ◆ Richard Nixon bought 30 minutes of television time on September 23, 1952 to defend himself in a speech now known as the “Checker’s Speech.” In it, he said:
- ◆ Nixon’s [Checkers Speech](#)

# Lessons Learned about Political Apologies

1. Must be immediate
2. Must construct the apology around a narrative that fits the cultural narrative of the time
3. Must relate directly to the audience
4. Must use appropriate emotions
5. Keep the legal department out of it (what is the primary function of a lawyer? Protect from litigation.)